

# A STAGE CAT

By  
ANNA ALICE CHAPIN

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IT was no secret among us that Gussie James was in love with the leading man, Dorrence MacGregor. Not only would our perceptive faculties have been disgraced forever if we had failed to note the fact, but Gus herself would have died of chagrin.

Not that Gus—or Augusta—was not a good sort. She was. Dare to insinuate anything off-color about her, and you would find yourself beset not only by her running-mate, Bird Laffin, but by the whole dressing-room.

Nevertheless, not even Bird Laffin, not even Gus herself, made any attempt to deny that she was in love with Dorrence MacGregor. She waited brazenly for him in the wings, and found no shame in appearing five minutes late in the dressing room, after every one else had begun to take off their make-up. She

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Gus, as usual, was hovering in another entrance, darting back and forth, with the nervous movements of a small bird, when MacGregor came on or off. Once in a while Josephine could catch a murmured word from the little extra, usually MacGregor's name, and knew that she was talking to him during the brief waits when he was off. She smiled pityingly, yet cynically, for she was a girl who had lived to the full extent of her twenty-eight years, and neither man nor woman had many illusions for her. Only one thing she still respected loyalty, when she found it, and that was love. And the "little James" loved, without doubt; therefore it was that Josephine slipped

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MacGregor's mouth hardened suddenly.

"Mrs. Harvey," he said, in his quiet, unconcerned English voice, "I have often wished from my heart that I were the brother or the personal friend of one of these young ladies, for the purpose—"

"Well?" said Mrs. Harvey.

"For the purpose, Mrs. Harvey," said MacGregor, adopting the flagrant American methods of warfare at last, "of giving you the worst calling down you ever got in your whole life. It so happens, to my own regret, that I do not know any woman in this company well enough to take up a cudgel in her defense without being impudent; but I'd earnestly advise you to put up a strong curb on your tongue, for one of these days you might run up against some fellow who, more lucky than myself, has the right to tell you just what he thinks of you!"

Mrs. Harvey departed, flashing promises of future revenge from her cold, little gray eyes.

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"That was nice of you!" she said, softly. "Awfully nice!"

Gus looked at her with a resentment that stormed to be expressed. This tall, clear-featured girl, who wore tailor-built gowns when she came into the theatre, and never made up for the street—what business had she to creep in here into the stage world and tilt against the rightful denizens thereof? Gus herself was dark and short and plump, and had made up for so many years that she would have felt cold if she had gone out on Broadway without her eyelashes.

Dorrence MacGregor turned quickly, and laughed a little awkwardly.

"Miss Drake!" he exclaimed. "I did not see you before!"

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"Mrs. Harvey gets frightfully on my nerves," laughed MacGregor. "I suppose I really was a bit absurd; but you know she really does slang the girls abominably!" he added, half-apologetically.

They had both forgotten Gus James. She watches them for a few blazing moments, then slips quietly away. In her heart was only room now for a fury of hate and love. How dared this other woman, who did not care—she knew by all the tokens of womanhood that she did not care!—how dared she come between her and the one dear, wonderful dream of her sordid little life? It was not only MacGregor's tone of deference and equality toward the other woman that she resented, not only the fact that on her appearance he had forgotten the existence of her, Gussie—not only, even, that he had shown such exaggerated and shocked amazement to think of her as having been troubled by the insolence of Mrs. Harvey. No, it was a deeper and more cruel hurt than all these—bitter as they might be. The sting was this: Josephine had dared to speak to him as she had never dared; she, the tall, well-dressed outsider, had faced him with the utter frankness of indifference. A moment that meant life, death and the hereafter to Gus, obviously signified nothing to Josephine but a casual interchange of amenities with one of her own kind.

From that moment Gus James lived, breathed and had her being in company with but one thought: the humiliation and punishment of Josephine Drake.

In the company was a breathless, eager youth who chanced to be very much in love with Gus. He was short, pink and plump, but he had an ardent heart, and Gus was very far from discouraging devotion in any quarter; so every evening he used to wait at the foot of the stairs to squeeze her hand excitedly, as she passed up to the dressing-room after the performance.

That night Gus smiled upon him more kindly than usual, and when the crowd of painted and powdered puppets thronged across the stage and on to the ascending steps, she permitted herself to linger a moment, even to be pulled gently back into a shadow while the assistant stage manager was crying "Strike!" and the air was full of the thunder of moving scenery.

When she entered the dressing-room two or three minutes later she looked carefully conscious, and varied it by a well-prepared start and blush when one of the girls asked her where she had been.

"I just stopped a moment—to speak to Mr. MacGregor!" she said, with a shade of very becoming embarrassment. "He had something to say to me!"

"Is he going away from here?" chanted Lil.

Josephine said nothing, but in her heart she recognized the lie, and pitied it from her deeper and stronger nature.

As Gus took off her wig, and picked up a big piece of cheesecloth with which to rub off her make-up, she contrived to turn her back squarely upon the rest of the room. As she did so, there was a sudden shout.

"Will you look at her shoulder, please? See Gussie's neck, girls! Gussie, where have you been? Has he got it so badly that he has to kiss you in the wings? Oh, Gus, Gus, Gus!"

"Hold on, there," remarked Dorrence MacGregor, pleasantly. He had stood about all he could. "You really must give me a chance to defend myself, Mrs. Harvey! We are not all quite so disreputable that a woman's reputation is ruined by speaking to us!"

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From that moment Gus James lived, breathed and had her being in company with but one thought: the humiliation and punishment of Josephine Drake.

The latter was standing, the pin still in her hand, her face burning, her eyes triumphant; and as Josephine looked at her, wondering, she cried, in a clearly audible voice:

"So he takes them all in turn! To-night it's the great and only Miss Drake that he's been kissing behind the scenes!"

Josephine drew herself up, the scarlet blood that poured into her neck hiding for the moment the dab of rouge upon her neck. But the dab of rouge was there. There were plenty of kind friends to tell her so, and to add: "My dear! How did it ever happen?"

She disdainfully wiped it off, and went through the rest of the evening with that crimson smirch upon her slender neck. No matter how high she might hold her head, no matter what cold carelessness she might call up to defend her from derision, there was the dab of rouge—two dabs of rouge, in fact—shaped as a pair of lips are shaped, crimson, betraying, hateful to her pride and modesty as nothing else could have been hateful. For now, at last, the vulgarity of this new life had entered into her existence and hurt her indifferent spirit.

It was all very well to say that it made no difference; that she did not care what such people thought; but when a group of extra men laughed beneath their breath as she passed them, and when she heard a whispered "Dorrie's latest!" ebbing away into silence behind her, she knew that she was not really above the smart of this last attack. She knew down in the recesses of her soul that Gus had won; she was wounded, even though she would not admit it.

When she met Dorrence face to face, it was all that she could do not to let him feel a difference. But

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was eager to accept opportunities, legitimate or otherwise, for going downstairs before her call.

She even accepted the innuendoes of the dressing-room—which, as all women know, are the broadest and roughest in the world—with a certain pride. It was as though she hoped against hope that some foundation for the blatant rumors that she faced would suddenly arise to justify and discount all that she had suffered both from envious and too truthful lips.

As a matter of fact—and here lies the pitiful part of the story—Dorrence MacGregor noticed the little dark James woman barely more than he did the other extra ladies. Nevertheless, he, being by some odd and rather tragic fatality a gentleman, was painstakingly courteous to her at all times, marvelling a trifle at her devotion, but utterly unconscious of her love.

Now it came to pass that on one direly unfortunate night a certain young woman entered the company who did not by rights, as the saying goes, belong to it. Her health had broken down, and an old predilection for the stage had induced her family and her physician to suggest a trial trip in this company as a means of distracting and quieting her nerves. Also, she knew the star, who was particularly keen on getting her into the show, with a view to possible newspaper reports later.

It further came to pass that the new young woman, whose name—not that it is important—was Josephine Drake, had known Dorrence MacGregor in various drawing rooms and at several dinner tables. When she caught sight of him one night she made her way to his side, all oblivious of disapproving looks, and greeted the red coat and ruffles with the same polite pleasure that she had been accustomed to show the black coat when she had met it and its owner in her friends' houses.

Dorrence MacGregor was delighted to see her; not so much for herself, for he was a long way from being even partially in love with her, but for what she represented—the world of well-gowned women and decent fellows to which he was grateful to think that he still belonged.

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